

The Heroic Pattern in the Epic of Gilgamesh

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Abstract

Gilgamesh was a mythical king who ruled the city of Uruk around 2800 BCE. His quests were collected in an Epic around 2000 BCE. This essay considers the Epic of Gilgamesh and describes the degree to which the life of Gilgamesh conforms to the so-called heroic pattern that scholars have identified in the lives of most mythical heroes.

1 Introduction

The Epic of Gilgamesh tells the story of a legendary king of Uruk¹ in South Babylonia (van Reeth 1994). He was the fifth ruler of Uruk after the deluge and possibly ruled Uruk around 2800 BCE (van Reeth 1994).

The Epic itself was originally conveyed in oral form, but was written down in Sumerian using cuneiform writing on clay tablets around 2000 BCE (Hooker 1996) (see figure 1). Many fragments of the epic also survive in other languages such as Hurrian and Hittite (Hooker 1996). The most complete surviving version of the Epic was written in Akkian on twelve tablets (Hooker 1996); these were “Written down according to the original and collated in the palace of Ashurbanipal², King of the World, King of Assyria” (Sandars 1972). Interestingly enough, the author of these tablets is named: Shin-eqi-unninni (Hooker 1996).

This essay starts with a summary of the Epic. This summary focuses on the life of Gilgamesh and ignores other events, such as Enkidu’s reflections on the value of civilised life or Utnapishtim’s account of the flood. The emphasis also falls on Gilgamesh’s life as described in the Epic, rather than on other sources. Gilgamesh’s essential quest for immortality is then highlighted. Finally, the Epic is compared to well-known heroic patterns typical of such myths.

¹Uruk is also spelled Erech; it is now known as Warka and situated in Iraq (*Funk & Wagnalls New Encyclopedia* 1983).

²Ashurbanipal was king of Assyria between 669 and 633 BCE (Hooker 1996).



Figure 1: Tablet 11 which describes the flood (Exhibited in the British Museum)

2 The Epic

At the start of the Epic Gilgamesh is a tyrannical king (*Funk & Wagnalls New Encyclopedia* 1983). “Gilgamesh sounds the tocsin for his amusement, his arrogance has no bounds by day or night. No son is left with his father, for Gilgamesh takes them all, even the children . . . His lust leaves no virgin to her lover, neither the warrior’s daughter nor the wife of the noble . . .” (Sandars 1972, p. 62).

The gods hear the lament of the inhabitants of Uruk and urge Aruru, the goddess of creation, to intervene. “So the goddess conceived an image in her mind . . . She dipped her hands in water and pinched off clay, she let it fall in the wilderness, and the noble Enkidu was created” (Sandars 1972, pp. 62–63). Enkidu is wooed to civilisation and Gilgamesh and Enkidu become friends.

The problem they now face is that of idleness: “But Enkidu opened his mouth and said, ‘I am weak, my arms have lost their strength, the cry of sorrow sticks in my throat, I am oppressed by idleness’ ” (Sandars 1972, p. 70). Gilgamesh resolves to establish his name by raising a monument in the land of the Cedars. Enkidu, however, remembers the size of the forest, and — more importantly — the fact that Enlil, father of the gods, “has appointed Humbaba to guard it and armed him [Humbaba] in sevenfold terrors, terrible to all flesh is Humbaba” (Sandars 1972, p. 71). After various sacrifices, Gilgamesh starts felling cedars and Humbaba arrives to stop him. Gilgamesh “took the axe in his hand, he drew the sword from his belt, and he struck Humbaba with a thrust of the sword to the neck, and Enkidu his comrade struck the second blow. At the third blow Humbaba

fell” (Sandars 1972, p. 83).

The next major event in the Epic occurs when, after Gilgamesh has washed and dressed in royal robes, the goddess Ishtar (the Sumerian Venus) sees how beautiful Gilgamesh is. “She said, ‘Come to me Gilgamesh, and be my bridegroom; grant me seed of your body, let me be your bride and you shall be my husband’ ” (Sandars 1972, p. 85). Gilgamesh, however, refused her request: “And if you and I should be lovers, should not I be served in the same fashion as all these others whom you loved once?” (Sandars 1972, p. 87). Ishtar then asks her father for the Bull of Heaven to take revenge on Gilgamesh. When the Bull of Heaven reaches Uruk, he starts wreaking havoc and is killed by Enkidu and Gilgamesh. To take revenge for this act Ishtar demands that one of the two has to die and Enkidu realises that he is the one. This great loss for Gilgamesh shapes his actions in the remainder of the Epic.

Gilgamesh now sets out on a quest looking for the secret for everlasting life — to get his friend to return to him, but also to achieve greatness for himself: “In his bitterness he [Gilgamesh] cried, ‘How can I rest, how can I be at peace? Despair is in my heart. What my brother is now, I shall be when I am dead’ ” (Sandars 1972, p. 97). He resolves to find Utnapishtim, who survived the deluge and after that “to him alone of men they gave everlasting life” (Sandars 1972, p. 97). Gilgamesh wants “to question him concerning the living and the dead” (Sandars 1972, p. 98). On his journey, Gilgamesh reaches the mountain of Mashu, where no mortal has gone and where he has to travel “twelve leagues of darkness” (Sandars 1972, p. 98) and finally reaches the garden of the gods. The keeper of the tavern (Siduri) tells him that his quest is futile, but directs him to Urshanabi, the ferryman of Utnapishtim. Eventually they depart on the Ocean and finally reach the “waters of death” (Sandars 1972, p. 104). Utnapishtim, however, does not look as Gilgamesh expected someone with everlasting life to look; in fact, he looks old. Gilgamesh asks him how he achieved everlasting life. Utnapishtim tells of the deluge, how he was instructed to build a boat and how he and his family escaped from drowning. After the flood, Enlil, god of the earth, granted Utnapishtim and his wife immortality.

At this point Utnapishtim grants Gilgamesh the opportunity to obtain everlasting life: Gilgamesh simply has to refrain from sleeping six days and seven nights. However, Gilgamesh falls asleep immediately. On each day, Utnapishtim places a fresh bread beside the sleeping Gilgamesh’s head. When they wake Gilgamesh on day seven the breads prove to him that he has actually slept over the whole period.

Now Utnapishtim offers Gilgamesh an opportunity to restore his youth: Gilgamesh should find a plant that grows underwater. Gilgamesh finds the plant and decides to take it to his city Uruk, to restore the youth of people in his city and then to eat some of it himself. However, a serpent grabs it from him. Gilgamesh returns to Uruk empty-handed.

When the Epic concludes, “Gilgamesh, the son of Ninsun, lies in the tomb” (Sandars 1972, p. 119)

3 The essence of Gilgamesh’s life

The Epic tells the tale of someone who attempts to obtain the secret of everlasting life. However, “Enlil of the mountain, the father of the gods, had decreed the destiny of Gilgamesh” (Sandars 1972, p. 70). This includes the fact that “the father of the gods has given you [Gilgamesh] kingship, such is your destiny, everlasting life is not your destiny” (Sandars 1972, p. 70).

Initially Gilgamesh’s quest is primarily for his own honour: “I have not established my name stamped on bricks as my destiny decreed; therefore I will go to the country where the cedar is felled. I will set up my name in the place where the names of famous men are written, and where no man’s name is written yet, I will raise a monument to the gods” (Sandars 1972, pp. 70–71).

However, Utnapishtim confirms his fate: “When the Anunnaki, the judges, come together they decree the fates of men. Life and death they allot but the day of death they do not disclose” (Sandars 1972, p. 107).

Eventually, Gilgamesh accepts, “Already the thief in the night has hold of my limbs, death inhabits my room; wherever my foot rests, there I find death” (Sandars 1972, p. 115).

However, in contrast with the Epic, it should be noted that Gilgamesh was indeed later honoured as a god in Mesopotamia, where he was considered a judge in the realm of death (van Reeth 1994, p. 89).

4 The heroic pattern

The consistent patterns in myths are well known to scholars. This section considers the degree to which the story of Gilgamesh, as related in the Epic, conforms to these patterns. Two heroic patterns are considered.

The first pattern to be considered has been recorded by Campbell (Harris & Platzner 1995, p. 229). This pattern is characterised by three phases: (1) the hero departs from his abode for a journey on his own; (2) to reach a point where he acquires insight about himself, his community, the gods and the relationships between them; this insight is acquired through encounters with “supernatural powers”; and (3) on his return these insights are shared with his community. It is clear that the Epic follows this pattern: (1) Gilgamesh does go on a long journey after losing Enkidu; (2) his conversations with Utnapishtim and others in the garden of the gods bring him to accept that he is indeed mortal and cannot avoid it; and (3)

Gilgamesh's version of his quests is carved into lapis lazuli at the gates of Uruk (Hooker 1996).

The heroic pattern recorded by Raglan (Harris & Platzner 1995, p. 229) is more detailed and will therefore be considered in phases: (1) the birth and childhood of the hero; (2) his quests; (3) his demise and (4) his death and afterlife.

Little is known about Gilgamesh's childhood. While the Raglan pattern has noted that the hero is typically born of a royal virgin and a king (where one of the two is typically a god), we are told that Gilgamesh is the son of Ninsun — a goddess — and a priest (Sandars 1972, p. 122). He is two thirds god and one third man. Nothing is said about his conception and birth that would make it unusual. The Epic does not note that he was moved to another country to be raised and to return to his kingdom. All of these latter common aspects noted in the Raglan heroic pattern are absent from the Epic.

Gilgamesh's quests include the slaying of Humbaba and of the Bull of Heaven — typical actions for a hero. There are striking parallels between the hero's typical journey to the underworld and Gilgamesh's journey to Utnapishtim: Gilgamesh's journey over the waters of death is very similar to the journey into Hades in Greek myths. Gilgamesh is accompanied by the ferryman Urshanabi; in Greek myth the traveller is ferried into Hades by Charon across the River Styx. In fact, Gilgamesh's journey through the mountain parallels "Odysseus's journey to the land of the dead, traversing a foggy, desolate waste" (Harris & Platzner 1995, p. 207). However, the hero also typically marries a princess and becomes a king after his quests, whereas Gilgamesh is already king at the beginning of the Epic and no marriage is described. One should consider the possibility that Gilgamesh's friendship with Enkidu replaces the marriage element in the heroic pattern. However, even if this were the case, the friendship starts before the quests, and would therefore still be atypical.

The third phase deals with the demise of the hero. Gilgamesh's fatal mistake is the slaying of the Bull of Heaven. However, it occurs at an atypical point: before his journey to the 'Underworld'.

According to the pattern, the hero now dies under strange circumstances, is not buried and is not succeeded by his children. The Epic gives little information about these aspects of Gilgamesh's death. It does, however, clearly state that Gilgamesh was indeed buried in a tomb. Finally, holy sites are typically devoted to the hero; again the Epic is silent, but, as has been pointed out above, Gilgamesh was indeed later honoured as a god.

5 Conclusion

Many parallels do indeed exist between the heroic patterns and the life and death of Gilgamesh as outlined in the previous section. Most deviations from the Raglan pattern are not true deviations, but aspects that are simply not covered by the Epic, such as details of Gilgamesh's childhood.

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